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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect of a linguistically based coaching program (with special attention given to the syntactic and semantic requirements of standardized language arts achievement tests) on the performance of selected black high school students on objective tests. The five subjects, one male and four female, were high school juniors who volunteered to participate in a 15-week reading study skills workshop. The final six weeks of the workshop consisted of a unit on test wiseness. Results of the study show that certain test taking behaviors can be improved and that the use of untimed tests for linguistically different students may be successful in reducing the inhibiting effects of worry resulting from potential dialect interference. (A review of pertinent literature, a bibliography, and an outline of the test wiseness sessions are included.) (JM)

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Overcoming Dialect Problems on the S.A.T.: A Descriptive Study of a Program for Urban Black High School Students

by

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A review of studies measuring the comparative performance of Blacks and Whites on standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests indicates that the mean scores of Blacks are lower than those of Whites. The scores of Blacks on the S.A.T. are very much restricted in range, particularly near the "floor" of the SAT-Verbal subtest (Stanley and Porter, 1967; Stanley, 1965).

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC FACTORS

Attempts at explaining these phenomena have developed along the lines of the culturally/linguistically different versus the culturally/linguistically disadvantaged models.[1] Advocates of the deficit model argue that language spoken in the Black community such as Black English Vernacular (BEV) and other "underdeveloped" speech patterns "restrict perceptual discriminations and concept formulations in ways that obstruct both verbal and non-verbal test performance as well as educational achievement" (Jones, 1960: 2986). An alternative view suggests that most standardized tests are culturally biased against poor Blacks and other minorities -- that is, the tests look for values and acquired skills consistent with middle and upper class mainstream culture. Cleary (1966), Temp (1971) and Linn (1973) have contributed studies on the research

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[1] See Frederick Williams (Ed.), Language and Poverty (Chicago: Markham, 1970) for a discussion of language difference vs. language deficit models.

definition of test bias and the predictive power of tests vis-a-vis minority student achievement. Syndicated columnist and former Educational Testing Service (E.T.S.) official Chuck Stone has questioned the assumptions of research on predictive validity, and he has articulated the contention of many Black psychologists and educators that "nationally standardized tests have: 1) excluded the Black population in establishing their norms; 2) become what Dr. Elias Blake has called 'instruments of reinforcement for negative Black images'; and 3) been used inadvertently or other wise to bar Blacks from higher education" (Stone, 1971:5). Linguists have offered perhaps the most provocative statement on this issue by demonstrating that many standardized tests are linguistically as well as culturally biased against speakers of BEV (Wolfram and Fasold, 1974: 206-217). Sociolinguistic variables may well account for the variance in mean scores of Blacks and Whites on standardized tests.

SOCIO-POLITICAL FACTORS

Tests have taken on a sinister quality for many Blacks in the areas of employment, education and promotion. Brill (1974) documents evidence of test abuse and racial and cultural bias on measures developed by E.T.S. as well as the unrestrained power of the College Board. Word (1974) cites numerous cases where tests have been used to screen out members of minority groups. Finally, Raspberry (1974) chides test makers for developing instruments of questionable validity that are not clearly related to tasks to be performed on

the job, and he suggests that minorities should be given the wherewithal to pass tests, by coaching if necessary.

THE PROBLEM

My concern in this present study is the effect of a linguistically-based coaching program on the performance of selected Black high school students on objective tests. Special attention is given to preparing these students to handle the syntactic and semantic requirements of standardized achievement tests in reading-language arts. What follows is a survey study whose purpose is to describe the methods and materials used in the coaching sessions and the students' reactions to these sessions. A second experimental study is planned to examine the possible cause-and-effect relationships of dialect interference, test-wiseness, practice on sample items and anxiety on the test performance of Black students.

REVIEW OF PERTINENT LITERATURE

Language Development and Achievement Tests

Elsa Roberts (1970) identified four problem areas that speakers of non-standard dialects of English may encounter on four tests -- PPVI, ITPA, MRT and WPPSI -- commonly used to measure language development in young children:

1. The content of the test questions and expected response.
2. The verbal style required by the test.
3. The non-linguistic factors inherent in the test situation.
4. The linguistic aspects of the test.

Hutchinson (1972) identified three general sociolinguistic

factors which create problems for Black children on tests like the Metropolitan Achievement Test:

1. Items which are differentiated in standard English (SE) but homophonous in BEV.
2. Items where the number of features which distinguish one item from others in a set is reduced.
3. Items which are culturally inappropriate.

Wolfram and Fasold (1974) observe that the extent of dialect bias in reading achievement tests is largely a function of the type of test given.[2] It is apparent from the research on dialect interference and reading that it is difficult to assess the specific effect a nonstandard dialect may have on an individual's performance at the more advanced stages of reading where comprehension is directly tapped.

Dialect Interference in Reading

The question of dialect interference in reading remains a provocative hypothesis, while empirical tests of the hypothesis leave the question still largely unresolved.

Goodman (1965) postulated that the more divergence there is between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of reading comprehension. He suggested that sound divergence (intonation and phonemes) and grammar divergence (suffixes and lexicon) may lead to interference in reading.

An alternative view is suggested in Goodman and Buck (1973). Goodman's research in miscue analysis, and his model of mature reading

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[2] See Roger Farr, Reading: What can be Measured? (Newark, Delaware: IRA, 1969), pp. 1-79 for a discussion of the problems of measuring reading achievement.

behavior as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1970) lead him to conclude that dialect-involved miscues do not interfere with the reading process or the construction of meaning, since they move to the reader's own language. It is the rejection of their dialects and educators' confusion of linguistic difference with linguistic deficit which interferes with the natural process by which Black children acquire reading and undermines the linguistic self-confidence of divergent speakers.

Labov (1965, 1972) defined the structural points of conflict between BEV and SE. He observed that teachers should spend much more instructional time on syntactic differences between the two dialects.

Hagerman and Saario (1969) presented a Sentence Recognition Task to high school girls (N = 100; 50 Black and 50 White) and concluded that dialect interference does exist at the recognition level for the Black subjects tested. It is apparent that the basic question of dialect interference in reading still remains.

Baratz (1969) has argued the importance of interference on the syntactic level and Stewart (1970) has suggested that most of the resistance to the dialect interference hypothesis has been directed against the empirical testing of that hypothesis and not against its enlightenment as a hypothesis.

Test-Wiseness in Objective Tests

Perhaps the most important discussion of test-wiseness was that reported by Jason Millman (Millman and others, 1965). A review of

investigations in which the problem-solving styles of students answering objective-type test items were studied resulted in "An Outline of Test-Wiseness Principles."

Langer, Wark and Johnson (1973) conclude that test-wiseness does exist and that it can be taught. College students who had a knowledge of test-wiseness performed better on objective tests than those who lacked this knowledge. Furthermore, the method of instruction in test-wiseness (reading, lectures and programmed exercises) did not seem to be important except that reading about the principles required the least amount of time.

Finally, Erickson (1972) argues that inadequate test sophistication is a delimiting factor that, if uncorrected, can greatly vitiate the contributory value of any standardized test "result." He delineates a series of techniques and procedures that are appropriate for the general types of test items encountered on standardized tests of reading comprehension.

Effects of Coaching and Sample Items on Test Performance

The position taken by E.T.S. and the College Board on the effects of practice on SAT test performance is that practice does not make a significant difference in one's scores. Yet, Jack Yourman, who runs the College Skills Center in New York, claims that his 30-hour course emphasizing vocabulary and reading-comprehension skills consistently improves scores by an average of 50 to 100 points (Brill, 1974: 68).

Roberts and Oppenheim (1966) worked with eleventh grade Black

males (N=60) from both rural and urban Tennessee schools in a program designed to help them do well on college admissions testing. Although a significant gain was found for the experimental group, it was attributable to a drop in the control group post-test scores.

Felker and others (1969) investigated the effect on student attitude and learning of handing out sample test items when students are preparing for a test. Significantly more students indicated that the sample items were helpful to them, and sample items were associated with higher performance on actual test items covering material from which sample items were taken. However, students who had sample items did not attain an overall test achievement which was higher than students who had no sample items.

Speededness and Anxiety as Factors in Test Performance

Evans and Reilly (1972) investigated the Reading Comprehension section of the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) in an attempt to determine if it is more speeded for candidates from predominantly Black colleges (fee-free students) than for a more typical population (regular center students) and to ascertain the effects of reducing the amount of speededness. The conclusion was reached that the Reading Comprehension section of the LSAT was considered a speeded test for the fee-free candidates and unspeeded for the regular candidates. Although reducing the number of test items from 35 to 27 for a given time period removed much of the speed component, the reduction did not give a greater benefit to fee-free students

than to regular center students in terms of mean scores.

Morris and Liebert (1969) determined that worry, not anxiety, affects performance on intellectual-cognitive tasks and interacts with relevant variables of the test situation. Worry varies in a test situation as a function of the examinee's expectation concerning his performance on the test; when a difficult task is presented, the subject's expectation decreases, causing him to be more worried. The interaction of anxiety and timing appears more pronounced for difficult tests.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Materials and Procedure

The study reported here is intended as an initial look at the issue of Black student performance on nationally standardized tests like the SAT, through a consideration of sociolinguistic variables that may provide variance in scores between Blacks and Whites.

A total of 5 subjects were involved in the study, 1 male and 4 females. All subjects were high-school juniors who volunteered to participate in a 15-week Reading-Study Skills Workshop developed by the author. The unit on test-wiseness reported here was conducted in the final 6 weeks of the workshop. Each session met once a week for a total of 90 minutes each week. Table I presents a summary of the sessions devoted to test-wiseness.

Insert Table I about here

Results

Findings will be reported for each session and will be confined to analyzing the students' reactions to program materials and format. During the course of this study, two subjects took the preliminary SAT. Their comments and reactions will be reported where appropriate.

Session #1

Specific areas of concern in this session included the following:

1. Principles of Examination Readiness
    a. Intellectual preparation
    b. Emotional preparation
    c. Physical preparation
2. Principles of Taking Any Examination
    a. Using time wisely
    b. Reading directions and questions carefully
    c. Using good reasoning techniques

Principles related to the emotional and physical preparation for tests were subsequently identified by two subjects as crucial to their improved test-taking behavior on a second administration of the SAT. A critical issue raised in this session concerned the predictive validity and usefulness of tests for Blacks. This is an issue that must be faced directly by teachers working with minority students in the area of testing. We agreed that tests were here to stay, and the students suggested that through instruction and practice they would be able to improve their scores on future

standardized tests.

Session #2

Principles of taking objective-type tests were considered in Session #2. Students found the Dove Counterbalance General Intelligence Test particularly stimulating and enjoyable. Aside from its stated purpose of demonstrating that "cultural deprivation" is only relative to the class of people being tested, the instrument is also a useful teaching tool. Odd-numbered items were separated from even-numbered items to constitute Form A and Form B. Form A was administered at the beginning of the session and scored for number right. This was followed by a review of principles related to taking objective-type tests. Form B was administered at the end of the session and scored using the correction-for-guessing formula. Written directions to Form B indicated that the correction-for-guessing factor would be used. An item analysis of both forms clearly indicated that these five students were able to answer more questions successfully after instruction. This is a tentative finding that needs to be tested for statistical significance in future replications of this study. It was also interesting to discuss test items on both Forms A and B after scoring. By sharing individual problem-solving styles, the students succeeded in synthesizing the test-wiseness principles considered in this session.

Session #3

Agreement, tense and mood were reviewed as important syntactic variables. Particular attention was given to the principal parts

of irregular verbs. Several students found the material in this session somewhat difficult. Because of the importance of syntax, the author strongly recommends that more time be given to the study of verbs in future work in this area. Word meanings and denotation and connotation were considered. The importance of context in shaping word meanings was readily perceived by all students.

Session #4

Figurative language, tone, and types of problem sentences concluded our discussion of problems of syntax and semantics. Austin's exercises on interpreting tone provide an excellent vehicle for evaluating the success of the semantic principles discussed in sessions 3 and 4.

Session #5

The six categories of reading comprehension questions most frequently represented on the verbal subtest of the SAT were discussed and analyzed in this session. These categories include:

1. Finding the Central Thought of a Passage
2. Finding Specific Detail Mentioned in the Passage
3. Finding Implications and Drawing Inferences From the Text
4. Determining the Meaning of Strange Words in the Text
5. Determining the Mood of the Writer
6. Determining the Special Techniques Used by the Author

Categories 1, 2 and 6 cover information thoroughly reviewed in earlier discussions of Structuring and Paragraph Analysis. The remaining types of reading comprehension questions were directly

related to the semantic and syntactic issues raised in the work on test-wiseness. A careful analysis of sample problems revealed the students' greater facility in handling this kind of question. However, it is clear that more on sample reading comprehension items is needed. Category 3 remains a problem area for several students.

Session #6

Students (N=4) were administered the Davis Reading Test, Series 2, Form 2A. Half took the test under timed conditions and half were given unlimited time to complete the test. The hypothesis that dialect interference may lead to a heightening of worry and a lowering of performance expectation in a test situation led the author to conclude that relaxing time restraints may compensate for the potential linguistic interference. A case-study approach involving one student leads tentative support to this conclusion.

James (fictitious name) is a former student at the University of Pennsylvania Reading Clinic who has experienced difficulty in word analysis skills. He reports that his relatively poor performance on the preliminary SAT was, in part, the result of frustration encountered when he realized that he could not complete more than a few of the items in each part, in the time required. James further reports that he can usually get the correct answer to a reading comprehension question if he is given enough time to "figure out what the author is saying." Given unlimited time to complete the

Davis Reading Test, James registered a good performance.[3] Perhaps more important than quantitative results, James emerged from the test situation with elation and confidence.

Conclusions

Roberts (1970) and Hutchinson (1972) have demonstrated that dialect interference affects the performance of Black children on standardized tests of language development and reading ability. It seems reasonable to conclude that this same phenomenon may provide difficulty for older Black students on standardized tests like the SAT. An accurate assessment of the effect of the test-wiseness materials and training on sample reading comprehension items must await subsequent research and the manipulation of the variables under experimental conditions. However, the study does suggest that certain test-taking behaviors can be improved and that the use of untimed tests for linguistically different students may be successful in reducing the inhibiting effects of worry resulting from potential dialect interference.[4]

The ability to establish rapport with Black students who have been identified as talented but who experience difficulty with testing is an important dimension of any coaching program. Anyone undertaking this challenge must be thoroughly acquainted with the literature on sociolinguistics and education and the political

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[3] Under untimed conditions, James scored at the 65th percentile on Level of Comprehension and at the 76th percentile on Speed of Comprehension.

[4] Study measured status and not change; however, results of Sessions 2 and 6 lend tentative support to the above claim.

consequences of testing as they affect the Black community.

A recent survey by the American Council on Education showed that 7.8% of the 1.6 million freshmen who entered colleges and universities last fall were Black, as compared to 8.7% in 1972. Although this first slash in minority enrollment since the mid-60's has been linked to economics, admissions and financial aid officers appear to be giving more weight to college admissions tests.

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Table I

A Summary of Test-Wiseness Sessions

Session #	Objective	Test-wiseness Materials
1	Test-Wiseness Principles I	J. Millman and W. Pauk. How To Take Tests (New York: (McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp. 2-13.
2	Test-Wiseness Principles II	Adrian Dove, "The Dove Counterbalance General Intelligence Test." In S. Farnham-Diggory, Study Guide for Cognitive Processes in Education, (New York: Harper, 1972), pp. 29-30. Millman, op. cit., pp. 56-71.
3	Problems of Syntax and Semantics I	J.C. Hodges and M.E. Whitten. Harcourt College Handbook (New York: Harcourt, 1972), pp. 54-80. R.D. Altick. Preface to Critical Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1969), pp. 33-54.
4	Problems of Syntax and Semantics II	Olive S. Niles. Reading Skills for Young Adults (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1971), pp. 94-104, 189-203. Lettie J. Austin. College Reading Skills (New York: Knopf, 1966), pp. 153-160.
5	Sample SAT Items on Reading Comprehension	S.C. Brownstein and M. Weiner. Barron's How to Prepare for College Entrance Examinations (Woodbury, N.Y.: Barron Educational Service, Inc., 1973), pp. 167-201.
6	Effect of Timing on Anxiety, Worry and Performance	Davis Reading Test, Series 2, Form 2A